

**U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**ANNUAL REPORT PRESS CONFERENCE**

**NATIONAL PRESS CLUB**

**MAY 13, 2003**

*Transcript by:  
Federal News Service  
Washington, D.C.*

MS. ANNE JOHNSON: Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's Annual Report press conference. My name is Anne Johnson. I'm the Director of Communications. We'll open with some remarks from the Commissioners and then go to question and answer from the press.

MS. FELICE GAER: Good morning. Although I'm not sure I should be saying good morning. We've all just learned as I'm sure you have of the terrible terrorist attack last evening in Saudi Arabia. Obviously, we, like everyone else, want to extend our condolences to the victims. But we want to do something more than that and that is that, as we have known for some time, but particularly since 9/11, there are no excuses for terrorism. Nothing justifies an action like this.

This Commission was empanelled in the weeks just before and after 9/11. And if there is one concept that has characterized this Commission, it has been the awareness, the conviction that terrorist attacks do not justify the trade-off of U.S. policy on human rights and religious freedom in exchange for cooperation in countries -- cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. This fact is as true today as it was when our Commission first issued it in the weeks after 9/11.

We are here this morning to present to you the report of the Commission, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Commission was created under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act which recognized the importance of religious freedom and related human rights as part of United States foreign policy worldwide. The protection of religious freedom is and has been a valuable tool in the fight against terrorism. It is a conviction of the members of this Commission that a country that respects freedom of religion -- and that includes freedom for all religious minorities -- will be a more stable and responsible member of the international community.

The International Religious Freedom Act was unique and represented an understanding by this government of the centrality of this right and the related rights in not only our foreign policy but in our world today. The Commission on International Religious Freedom is independent of government. We are a government agency but each of the nine Commissioners is appointed independently and we serve as an independent agency. We have reached our conclusions and our findings which you have before you today by consensus.

We are quite convinced that the Commission on International Religious Freedom is unique. There is nothing else like it in the world. It is a bipartisan commission. We work with information, analysis and we produce policy recommendations for the Congress, the State Department and the President to advise on how to make U.S. foreign policy more effective with regard to freedom of religion and related human rights. The Commission has had significant responses and its recommendations have been able to be

brought into policy and we bring advice and accountability into U.S. foreign policy in the promotion of religious freedom and related rights.

We have nine members of our Commission. I'd like to introduce them to you now. I'll start with the -- I'll go from right to left, your left to my right. I'm Felice Gaer and the Chair of the Commission and I direct the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights. To my immediate left is Michael Young who is our Vice-Chair. Could you just put your hand up as I indicate. Michael Young is the Dean of the George Washington University School of Law.

Sitting next to him is Ambassador Charles Stith. Commissioner Stith is the Director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University. Sitting next to him is Nina Shea. Commissioner Shea is the Director of the Center of Religious Freedom at Freedom House. Next to her is Professor Leila Sadat. Professor Sadat hails from the Washington University School of Law.

Sitting next to her is Richard Land. Commissioner Land is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Last but certainly not least is Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh. Professor Kazemzadeh is the Senior Advisor to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States.

Now not with us today unfortunately is Bishop William Francis Murphy, Bishop of the diocese of Rockville Centre of New York, who has been an active and engaged member of our Commission. And making up the complement of Commissioners additionally is our ex-officio Commissioner, John Hanford, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and one Commissioner who resigned because she took a post in the Administration and that was Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli who resigned at the end of March to become Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations at the National Security Council.

The nine Commissioners meet regularly, debate, argue and decide on the conclusions, recommendations and reports that are before you today. These we'll be presenting and releasing today not only as a report on our activities and an assessment of the International Religious Freedom Act and how that has been implemented across the government and with what effect but also a series of country reports. This is a continuing series of country reports that we have been releasing on a rolling basis.

But today we will be introducing -- and I must say, we had not expected the kind of terrible news we have today -- but we will be releasing a major report on Saudi Arabia today. In addition, we will be releasing reports on Vietnam, Afghanistan, China and North Korea, Sudan, Russia and Belarus and Laos. These become part of the other reports that we have been issuing throughout the year.

The Commission identifies countries where there are systematic, egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom under the International Religious Freedom Act.

Those countries that have been designated by the Administration as countries of particular concern include Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea and Sudan. Our Commission, in addition, has identified India, Laos, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and Vietnam as countries that should be on the list of countries of particular concern and therefore subject to Presidential actions under the International Religious Freedom Act.

We will now have a presentation of the major findings in each of the reports being issued today, presented by my fellow Commissioners, and then we will have a time, we hope -- we're sure -- for questions and answers afterwards. So to introduce the report on Saudi Arabia, I'm pleased to turn the microphone over to my Vice-Chair, Dean Michael Young.

MR. MICHAEL YOUNG: Madam Chair, thank you. Good morning and let me echo our Chairman's welcome to each of you as well as our thanks. Each of you represents organizations that understand as do we the importance of centrality of this issue. We know that your readers, your viewers, your listeners also understand just how very important this issue is to millions and millions of people around the world. And we appreciate your presence here today.

Saudi Arabia presents a very interesting situation because it is a country with which the United States has a long-time, close friendly relationship on the one hand. On the other hand, it is a country described by our own U.S. Department of State in its annual report on freedom of religion as well as this annual report on human rights that freedom of religion simply does not exist in Saudi Arabia. And it's a case where the government imposes forcefully and completely a particular interpretation, a relatively narrow, puritanical version of Islam based on the Wahhabi doctrine. And as a result, contract workers which comprise almost a quarter of the population in Saudi Arabia as well as others who are Saudi citizens who do not themselves adhere to that particular brand of Islam find that their capacity to practice their own religion is extraordinarily and almost completely restricted.

Our report goes into some detail as to the various abuses that are perpetrated by the Saudi government in that regard. They include complete prohibition of establishing non-Wahhabi places of worship and the public expression of non-Wahhabi religions, the detention, imprisonment and torture of Shia clerics and Christian foreign workers for expressing their religious views or worshipping in private. The interpretation and enforcement of religious laws in Saudi Arabia affect every aspect of women's lives and results in serious violations of their human rights as well.

Now, despite the occasional disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the United States, we have a generally very close relationship with that government. Our Commission believes and strongly recommends to both the Congress and the Administration that advancing human rights, including the freedom of religion, become a major focal point of that relationship both as a private matter as well as a public matter.

Legally, U.S. efforts to encourage Saudi Arabia to comply with its international commitments should be strengthened. Let me tell you the kinds of things we're urging happen in that country. Urge that the government allow private worship, that people be permitted to have, adopt or change their religion, that they be permitted to manifest their religion either individually or in community with others, that all people regardless of their religious faith be entitled to equal protection of the laws and that parents have the right to instruct their children in the religion of their choosing.

Now, if all that sounds familiar, it should. Those are simply the basic international freedom of religion human rights that are established by the UN Human rights documents. Those are not idiosyncratic American perceptions of freedom of religion. But these are human rights that, with respect to freedom of religion, have been accepted by virtually all countries in the world including the Saudis themselves with some exceptions. In that regard, we have made recommendations that really fall into four broad categories.

First, we suggest that the United States urge the guarantees and implementation of these simple rights of freedom of religion starting with allowing people simply to practice their own religion in private. This is something the Saudi government says that it does. But in fact, there are significant and credible reports that groups have been singled out for doing precisely that and, as I mentioned earlier, arrested, tortured and detained for doing that.

That non-Wahhabi places of worship be permitted in specified foreign compounds or in unadorned buildings, that they be permitted. That foreign clerics be permitted into the country wearing their religious garb to service their own religious communities. Indeed there are some religious communities that really cannot claim that they are even worshipping without the presence of their own clerics.

Also we urge that laws be enforced by professional law enforcement officials. There is a group of individuals in the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, sometimes locally known as the *mutawaa*. We recommend the dissolving of that. We recommend the review of all cases of people who have been imprisoned for political or religious reasons and release those who are imprisoned merely for worshipping and following their own religion.

We urge an end to state prosecutions of blasphemy, apostasy, sorcery and those kinds of crimes and urge that Saudi Arabia ratify and comply with the other international human rights documents that it has not currently signed. We also urge that there be removal from the textbooks that are used in many situations in Saudi Arabia at the pre-secondary education level that promote enmity, intolerance, hate and violence towards other groups.

Secondly, we urge the U.S. government to address the issue of global propagation of some of these same attitudes. There is substantial and credible evidence that, in our judgment, justifies further investigation that through Saudi funding, there has been a

promotion of ideologies that encourage hate, intolerance, enmity between groups as well as violence. We suggest that Congress fund a study to get to the bottom of that and find out the true facts and that this study be funded by Congress and six months after its funding that the Administration report back on the results of that study and urge the Saudi government to cooperate with that study.

Third, we urge the government to use its close relationship with the Saudi government to raise these concerns both in private, as we have been told has happened in the past, as well as in public and make it an important part of our relationship with the Saudi government. In that regard, we encourage Congress to hold biannual hearings to inquire and determine from the State Department precisely what has been done and what the effect of that is. As mentioned earlier, we have also recommended and cannot understand how one cannot name Saudi Arabia as a country of particular concern. It fits all the legislative designations and that should be a starting point for our working with Saudi Arabia.

We also urge the government to expand its human rights initiatives in the Middle East to include Saudi Arabia. As you know, the Middle East Partnership Initiative as well as the Middle East Democracy Fund have both been designed to advance human rights in the Middle East. But Saudi Arabia has been inexplicably excluded from that. And we encourage that be extended to Saudi Arabia as well.

Finally, we urge that the U.S. government examine its own practices with respect to the kinds of religious worship of American military personnel and American government personnel in Saudi Arabia and ensure that they have complete free and total access to their religious community and their capacity to worship as well as investigate the approach taken by U.S. businesses to the extent to which they are in any way facilitating this abuse of human rights in their business activities in Saudi Arabia. We again suggest that that be investigated, studied and reported back to Congress.

Finally, just in conclusion, let me say, we do this in a spirit of friendship with the people of Saudi Arabia. We have had a close relationship and it is our view that close friends can talk to each other. Certainly the Saudis have not in recent months been hesitant to criticize the United States on certain fronts. We see no reason the United States should be similarly hesitant to express our concerns to the Saudis on behalf of the Saudi people as well as on behalf of almost a quarter of its population that has been denied in every way imaginable their own opportunity to worship as they choose.

Thank you.

MS. NINA SHEA: Good morning. I'm Nina Shea. Vietnam is what I will be discussing and Vietnam is another dictatorship of fear. The Buddhist Supreme Patriarch Tchich Huyen Quang has been in detention for 20 years. The Hoa Hao group can't publish their founder's writings. The Catholic Church is restricted in educating, ordaining and assigning priests.

Father Thaddeus Ly has been sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment after giving testimony before our Commission. Three of his relatives were imprisoned and given lengthy sentences this January for raising his case with authorities in Vietnam. The Evangelicals, Hmong people and Montagnards have been particularly persecuted.

Just this year, one of their congregations was gassed while meeting in a Sunday worship service. One of their members was beaten to death last August for refusing to sign a pledge recanting his Christian faith. Three hundred churches were shut down last year in the East tribal areas.

The National Assembly of Vietnam is now discussing a law to codify some of these restrictions even further. Our Commission sent a mission to Vietnam last year and it was guarded and monitored the entire time it was there. They were not free to travel. They were not free to conduct interviews. There were even two traffic accidents manufactured by their minders in order to thwart their investigation.

Congressman Wolf this week made a statement on Vietnam. We agree U.S. policy is essentially trade policy and it isn't working. The religious freedom situation has been deteriorating since the bilateral trade agreement was concluded between our two countries.

We therefore have made several -- three categories of recommendations regarding Vietnam. One is that the U.S. government and the State Department should set and publicize benchmarks, specific steps that it would like to see achieved in progress towards greater religious freedoms in Vietnam. There have been 10 rounds of human rights dialogue and not only hasn't there been progress or substantial progress but the situation is worsening.

Two, the United States should use its leverage to improve human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. It should designate Vietnam a country of particular concern as the Commission itself has recommended. Congress should pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act introduced this year by Congressman Chris Smith. The United States should withhold support for non-humanitarian loans from the International Financial Institute until substantial improvements have been marked on religious freedom and human rights.

And three, the United States should strengthen the monitoring and reporting on religious freedom in Vietnam. It should review Vietnam carefully during this year's regular review under the Jackson-Vanik amendment. The United States should find ways around the jamming of Radio Free Asia. It should insist on access to religious leaders in the tribal areas that are hardest hit by the persecutions.

And finally, the United States should support human rights activists, those advocating human rights within Vietnam. Again, we do this in a spirit of friendship and solidarity with the Vietnamese people. And Vietnam, by the way, is one of the most religious populations in Asia and deserves our support.

MS. GAER: You will next hear from Commissioner Leila Sadat, who will be speaking about the Commission's report on Afghanistan.

MS. LEILA SADAT: Good morning and let me echo the comments of my colleague thanking you for being here. Afghanistan, of course, is a country that has been much in the news since September 11th occurred in 2001 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan that began on October 7th of that year.

In fact, Afghanistan, to some extent, may serve as a cautionary tale for what is now occurring in Iraq because even as attention shifts to Iraq, the United States needs to be careful not to forget that the work in Afghanistan is just beginning. The groundwork is potentially being laid in Afghanistan for a regime that may become almost as repressive as the Taliban was, particularly with regard to religious freedom. This is occurring, we believe, with the consent and, in some cases, even assistance from the United States government.

There are disturbing reports that an extreme and strict interpretation of Islamic law or Sharia is being nurtured in the post-Taliban era and attempts are being made to include some of the harshest and most discriminatory elements of Sharia in the new constitution of Afghanistan. The notorious Ministry for the Prevention of Virtue and Vice, which forced religious conformity and meted out harsh punishments under the Taliban, has apparently been reconstituted in gentler guise. Abuses against women and girls continue apparently again with the support of the police and courts and women and girls now do have an opportunity to go to school. But recent attacks and threats against schools for girls are keeping many away.

The Commission has strongly supported U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and is very committed to maintaining its focus on human rights concerns there. The Commission in fact, over the past year, has taken a lead amongst U.S. agencies in many ways in focusing attention on questions of human rights that had perhaps been forgotten in the campaign against terrorism and our concern for terrorism and drug trafficking. The Commission held a major forum in January of this year co-sponsored by the George Washington School of Law in which we brought together high-ranking Afghan officials and over 150 NGO representatives and others to discuss issues relating to Afghanistan. We have published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* and we have written to President Bush on at least one occasion.

But specific concerns that we have with respect to Afghanistan are highlighted in our report and I won't bore you with repeating them here. But I would just highlight a couple of those. Again, as I mentioned, there are reported efforts to circumscribe universal human rights and particularly we're concerned that those efforts may be successful and that the new Afghan constitution may be much less supportive of religious freedom and diversity than one would hope.



There appears to be misguided judicial activism by Afghanistan's chief justice including the endorsement of amputations and other corporal punishments against non-Muslims. There have been coercive measures by official agencies, including religious police that I referred to earlier. Torture and maltreatment of prisoners including reports of incidents resulting in mass deaths which have not yet been credibly investigated. And there appears to be a continuing culture of impunity and lack of accountability for past human rights abuses which tend to encourage their reoccurrence.

Our recommendations with regard to Afghanistan focus on primarily three areas. The first is security. Unless the Afghan people are secure in their homes, in their property, in their persons, none of the other human rights with which this Commission is concerned can be implemented.

Our second major area of concern is the rule of law. It is well known that without effective and efficient judicial and political institutions, the rule of law cannot take root and human rights cannot be assured. The United States will hopefully work hard to ensure that the new constitution and other institutions of civil society, political society are built in such a way so as to ensure that the rule of law can flourish in Afghanistan. But we have serious concerns about that happening particularly with regard to accountability for past abuses.

Finally, and most importantly for our Commission, we have concerns about human rights. We have issued recommendations with respect to educating Afghan people, with respect to U.S. diplomacy and, most importantly, we have urged the government on several occasions to appoint a high-ranking official for human rights who would be an official member of the U.S. delegation and U.S. representation in Afghanistan and would be there not only to ensure that security is present, that roads are built, that food is distributed but that, in the process of reconstructing Afghanistan, that money, that commitment, that resources are available and effective in order to ensure that a post-Taliban Afghanistan doesn't become as repressive as the Taliban was and even the Northern Alliance prior to that.

Thank you very much for your attention.

MS. GAER: Introducing the Commission's ongoing work on China and North Korea is Dr. Richard Land.

DR. RICHARD LAND: Thank you for being here today and I want to underscore what my colleagues have said and to say that, as an American, I am proud that our country cares about these issues. I can tell you that if the government of the United States was not focusing on these issues and was not forcing other countries to address these issues and pay attention to them because the International Religious Freedom Act requires our State Department to issue an annual report on these issues, very few people in the world would care about religious freedom and universal human rights as they relate to freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. And the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is really the spear point to coordinate that. And we,

as Chairman Gaer has said, are an agency that is independent of the State Department. We work with the State Department but we also work with the Congress and we are to make recommendations to the Executive branch and to the Congress.

The Chinese government remains a particularly severe violator of religious freedom. In fact, in the past year, official respect for religious freedom in China has diminished even further. Persons continue to be confined, tortured, imprisoned and subject to other forms of ill-treatment on account of their religion or belief. Since its establishment over three years ago, the Commission has consistently spoken out about the widespread and serious abuses of the right of freedom of religion and belief in China and recommended that China be designated as a country of particular concern.

In March 2003, the Secretary of State again named China as a CPC as it has done since the IRFA process began. The Commission had recommended that in order to protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, the Chinese government must take effective steps in four critical areas. Now these are detailed in pages 86 to 92 of the report itself. But the four critical areas are: one, end its crackdown on religious adherence; two, reforming the legal framework pertaining to religious activities; third, affirming the universality of religious freedom and, four, fostering a culture of respect for human rights.

U.S. policy should encourage such steps and effectively respond to whether or not such steps indeed are taken. In the Commission's view, the Chinese government has not taken significant steps in any of these areas. Given the appalling situation for religious freedom and other human rights in China and its ongoing status as a country of particular concern, the Commission was disappointed that the United States chose not to introduce a resolution condemning the Chinese government's violations of religious freedom and other human rights at the 2003 session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

One of the reasons cited by the State Department spokesman for not sponsoring such a resolution was that the Chinese government had extended an invitation to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Now we appreciate the compliment concerning the potential effectiveness of our Commission. For several years, the Commission sought an invitation from the Chinese government to visit that country and we look forward to the type of cooperation from the Chinese government that would make for a successful visit. However, although invitations to bodies like our Commission are welcome, they do not demonstrate the kind of changes in China's human rights practices that would justify the United States not introducing their resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights.

I also want to say a word about North Korea. Religious freedom and all other freedoms remain essentially non-existent in North Korea, where the government has a policy of actively discriminating against all religious beliefs. In effect, North Korea is what a country would look like if it were run by John Gotti.

The North Korean state severely represses public and private religious activities. Thousands of North Koreans have fled to China in recent years. Refugees who are either forcibly repatriated are captured or have voluntarily returned to North Korea are accused of treason. Those who have had contact with South Koreans or Christian missionaries are subjected to severe punishment including death.

Since its establishment over three years ago, the Commission has consistently spoken out about the widespread and serious abuses of the rights of freedom of religion and belief in North Korea and recommended that North Korea be designated as a CPC. In 2001, following a Commission recommendation, the Secretary of State for the first time designated North Korea as a CPC. The Secretary of State again designated North Korea as a CPC in March of 2003. The Commission has welcomed the U.S. decision to co-sponsor a resolution to criticize the North Korean government for its human rights practices at the recent meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights. And the detailed recommendations are found on pages 95 to 98 of our report.

MS. GAER: Our next speaker will be Ambassador Charles Stith who will speak about the Commission's ongoing and extensive work on Sudan.

AMB. CHARLES STITH: Thank you, Madam Chair. I too want to join my colleagues in expressing my appreciation for your being here this morning and also to commend those of you who have taken on this task of securing a place for believers of whatever persuasion in this world.

The freedom to believe is the foundation of the freedom to be. Every other human right is rooted in that freedom. Sudan has been on the radar screen of the Commission since it was established in 1998 simply because it is the site of Northern Africa's longest running and most deadly conflicts. Religious freedom has been a major issue in Sudan's civil war. This Commission is concerned that the Sudanese government has not been held accountable for significant violations of agreements it has made with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement as a part of ongoing peace negotiations.

The February 2003 report by the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team clearly states that the Sudanese government violates these agreements on numerous occasions by launching lethal attacks on civilian targets. While the United States publicly condemned these attacks by the Sudanese government, the Commission is concerned that the government of Sudan will conclude that it can violate its agreements with relative impunity while continuing to negotiate in peace talks. The United States government should demand significant reductions of Sudanese government forces and military equipment in Southern Sudan while ensuring that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement does not take advantage of such a reduction, should it occur.

There are a number of recommendations that the Commission has relative to initiatives to counter the abridgement of religious freedom in Sudan. The Commission recommends firstly that the U.S. government should insist that the capital of a reunited North and South Sudan, most likely Khartoum, be a place where people of all faiths can

worship freely and where the laws are reflective and respectful of all religions and legal traditions in Sudan. It should oppose the application of Sharia law to non-Muslims where everybody may reside in the country.

In the same vein, because in the foreseeable future, Sudan will exist as a united state, we urge that national institutions such as the military, law enforcement and the highest levels of judiciary be secular. Secondly, we recommend that the U.S. government should ensure that adequate funding is supplied to the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team. Thirdly, we recommend that the U.S. government should insist that the concerns of peoples in the contested areas of the Nuba Mountains now be fairly and comprehensively resolved and support the repatriation of civilians displaced from these areas.

Fourthly, we recommend that the U.S. government should disburse funding quickly for humanitarian purposes that would be supportive of the peace process and immediately release funding to build civil society and to promote economic development in Southern Sudan. Fifth, we recommend that the U.S. government should continue to keep in place existing sanctions on Sudan and refrain from upgrading diplomatic relations with the government in Khartoum.

Next, we recommend that the U.S. government should continue to push access for delivery of humanitarian assistance and expand humanitarian relief where it is most needed. And finally, we call on the U.S. government to build upon the work of the International Eminent Persons Group to combat and end the terrible practice of abduction and enslavement by government-sponsored militias such as establishing a permanent monitoring mechanism.

MS. GAER: Our final introduction will be delivered by Professor Firuz Kazemzadeh, who will speak about the Commission's report and findings on Russia to which we sent a delegation this year.

PROF. FIRUZ KAZEMZADEH: The situation in Russia is not rosy but I would like to start by saying that Russia should not be lumped with Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan. The situation there is so different from what it was under the Soviet Union that one almost feels euphoria in confronting things as they are today.

Now, having said that, I must add that the things are not going as smoothly as one may have hoped. Under the new constitution which was adopted after the fall of the Soviet Union, religious freedom was guaranteed. But there has been a great deal of backsliding. It really started with the law of 1997 which gave a special status to so-called traditional religions. But there have been other things happening and most of them have very unfortunate characters.

There has been a tendency on the part of the government to reach a kind of a compromise with the Orthodox Church giving the Orthodox Church a primacy in the religious field at the expense of other religions. There have been statements made about

other religions particularly about the Muslims that put the whole Muslim community in danger of discrimination which has occurred on many occasions.

There have been provable facts and unprovable but palpable attitudes in play. Provable facts, for instance, is restriction of visas to foreign religious workers who wish to enter Russia. Unprovable facts, although sometimes they are provable too actually, are anti-Semitic statements, anti-Muslim statements which are made in private and sometimes even in public.

Now all of this does not amount to Russia being a country of particular concern. But at the same time, because of Russia's importance in the world, because of the enormous influence Russia wields in the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Commission feels very strongly that the United States government must continue to monitor the situation in Russia and try to exercise influence in preventing Russia from returning to undemocratic practices of the past.

In this connection, the Commission made five recommendations. One, that the United States government should raise concerns about the growing influence of undemocratic elements. As an instance of this, there was a certain report that was surreptitiously released or leaked, the so-called "Zorin" report, the existence of which was denied by most members of the Russian government. But nevertheless, some of the elements of that report are there. The report goes so far as to name the Catholics, the Protestants and the Muslims as enemies of Russia. So we should keep monitoring and look at this.

The U.S. government should oppose attempts to roll back religious freedom. The U.S. government should use -- should urge protection of religious minorities particularly preventing intolerance against Muslims, against the Jews and, of course, the crisis in Chechnya exacerbates the situation in regard to the Muslims. The U.S. government should remain vigilant of the progress of democratic reform and the protection of human rights in Russia. And finally, the U.S. government should support those forces in Russia which work for religious freedom and other human rights recognizing that there is also a liberal tradition in Russia which perhaps may be somewhat submerged now but which exists.

Thank you.

MS. GAER: I want to stress that what you have heard so far is just a sampling of the material that you will find in the reports that are available to all of you in the packets outside. Furthermore, should you wish additional information about the Commission's work, its statements, letters and activities during the year which are described but not reproduced in that report, you can get it online at [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov) and we encourage you to use that as a regular portal to this issue. I will now take questions and answers. My plan is to call on people once in order to give everybody an opportunity at least once to ask a question and then I'd like to ask you to be sure your question is in the form of a question and also would you please identify yourself clearly and your affiliation.

Yes, sir.

MR. : I am Rob Marus of the Associated Baptist Press. And my question is for anyone who wishes to address it. Last year, you released a statement and had a press conference and said that the United States should appoint a high level diplomatic person to monitor and encourage the development -- the protection of religious freedom in Afghanistan and that the United States was not prepared to do that and you all weren't prepared to send someone to monitor it yourselves. Did anything ever come of that? How come we haven't heard anything more about that program in Afghanistan? And so you see a sufficiently perilous situation influencing Iraq -- the same there?

MS. GAER: Let me just say very quickly that we have every intention of pursuing and we have pursued it every level including the highest levels of the government that recommendation for a special envoy in Afghanistan. You heard Commissioner Sadat speak about that as one of the ongoing recommendations. We have every intention of emphasizing that. Our forum this year at George Washington University found consensus on the importance of the need for that. Whether we spoke to Afghan officials, American, foreign officials, knowledgeable experts, Commissioners and others, there was agreement on that across the board.

Commissioner Sadat, did you want to add anything on that?

MS. SADAT: Well, I wasn't here last year. I'm involved here in Afghanistan as a human rights envoy. But certainly I think the Commission has an ongoing interest in Afghanistan and we are pursuing the issue with the human rights envoy. We've pretty much reached a brick wall with respect to government agencies that would be doing the appointing. I think we have not even been able to see a copy of the constitution, for example, that we believe our government has received. But we haven't seen it. And that constitution is scheduled to be released I think May 24th and 25th and be put to a Review Commission in Afghanistan. So we're getting, I suppose, stonewalled.

MR. LAND: Yes, if I could just add to that. One of the most interesting things that happened at the forum on Afghanistan was a statement by an Afghan official that universal -- you have to understand universal human rights are relative in an Islamic country, to which we replied, "Oh no, they're not." And all the promises that have been made at this forum about government assistance to Afghanistan in rebuilding Afghanistan that these officials will not be able to make good on these promises because the Congress of the United States over time is not going to give a lot of American taxpayers' money to countries that are -- to help reconstruct countries that are violating systematically basic human rights such as the right to freedom of religion and belief.

And so we remain very concerned about this issue and will continue to remain concerned about it and will do our very best to press both our government and the government of Afghanistan on this issue and similarly in Iraq. We have already approached the subject of sending someone to Iraq and, as you would understand, at this

point in time you have to have official government authorization to go to Iraq. And we have not received it at present.

MS. : (Off mike.)

MS. GAER: It was one of the members of the delegation who came from Afghanistan who was a member of the drafting committee of the constitution.

MR. LAND: On the Judicial Commission that's drafting the report.

MS. SADAT: In fairness, there were a variety of views expressed. But that's certainly was one stream of thought.

MS. GAER: Yes, sir.

MR. : Every year when you publish your report, we have reaction that you pick certain countries which, you know, special groups, special interest groups in the United States is urging you to. I mean, every year, we cannot (inaudible) publish all the reports. But we have a reaction, you know, about the -- same reaction.

Second, for example Syria. Syria has a minority of Alawites, 5 percent truly, 75 percent are Sunnis. You do not bother about that, because, you know, I don't know why. You know, people ask why. So what criteria you pick these countries every year and every other year? (Inaudible) -- practice Sufi religion, you know, they oppress you, they put you in prison. There are a few thousand people missing because they -- thank you.

MS. GAER: Well, the question is the criteria that the Commission uses. This is addressed in the Annual Reports and as you can see we meet in a regular review put together with our staff and we try to examine that according to the criteria that are provided therein for us.

Yes, would you like to continue?

MR. YOUNG: Let me just add a comment on that, -- if I may add a comment on -- I've been on the Commission now since its inception and the range of countries we have looked at has been very broad and very extensive. And I think it's impossible for any fair-minded observer to say that we have singled out any particular set of countries either because of the religious preferences of a group of countries. I mean, as you even saw today, our countries range as far afield as Vietnam and Laos on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other. So I think any perception that this is targeted at any particular countries or any particular religious orientation, I think, is just simply nonsense.

The second -- why we've not gone into some countries. Number one, I think we have made an attempt to determine priorities in terms of the degree of oppression as well as some attempt to gauge when the United States might be able to do something effective with respect to its foreign policy. We do not have similar relations with every country in

the world. Therefore our capacity to affect and encourage change varies rather significantly.

And it seemed to us that some combination of an examination of how bad and egregious the repression was, combined with some sense of could we do anything in a positive way, were at least two of the important variables. And as you see every year, both the number of countries expands and the range of countries varies, as well. I have no doubt if we stay in existence long enough we'll examine everything.

MS. GAER: Yes, sir.

MR. : Yeah. What are the Commission's most current recommendations regarding Laos? (Balance of remark inaudible.)

MS. GAER: The Commission has issued a report just two months ago on Laos, and those are available and you're welcome to see those. We did recommend Laos, again, as a country of particular concern. And, would any Commissioner like to comment further?

I encourage you to just check the report and you'll see.

MR. KAZEMZADEH: The situation in Laos, as we ourselves witnessed because we had a delegation visiting Laos, is mixed. It is not as bad as in Vietnam or in Saudi Arabia, but there are still severe restrictions, restrictions on practice of all religions, perhaps with the exception of Buddhism, which is so much a part of the Laotian culture that it would be very difficult for any government to act against it. There have been imprisonments. There have been forced recantations. And the recommendations that our Commission has made are in conformity with our general attitude that the U.S. government should continue to monitor the situation, to support those in Laos who are interested in the improvement of conditions. Because there has been a decree published by the prime minister of Laos regulating the conditions of religions in Laos. But it remains to be seen to what extent that decree is real and whether it's going to lead to any improvements.

MS. GAER: Yes ma'am.

MS. : I just wanted to ask about the initiative on humanitarian aid (inaudible). He had an issue in Russia, and it's instantly going to be an issue in (inaudible). And I just wondered what the Commission's position is.

MS. GAER: Well, as you know the right to public religious expression is part of the rights of religious freedom, under international conventions. And that would include religious expression with regard to sharing one's faith. Beyond that, Mike would you comment?



MR. YOUNG: We have urged humanitarian aid be increased in a variety of different contexts. But we also have stressed in those contexts the humanitarian aid should be for providing humanitarian relief and have pointed out particularly in the case of Sudan, for example, where certain diversions of humanitarian aid were being made in order to encourage what appeared to be religious conversions or were given in a preferential way to members of certain religious groups and not other religious groups. We condemned that and urged that humanitarian aid be given based on humanitarian needs and humanitarian interests. I think if you read our Sudan report you'll see that coming through. On the other hand, we have not taken any position with respect to the provision of -- where private organizations provide humanitarian assistance under their own auspices.

MS. GAER: Yes ma'am.

MS. SHEA: Just to clarify, in the situation of Sudan USAID supplied food was being given to an Islamic charity who was insisting on conversion before recipients were allowed to eat. And that's what we spoke out about and if that happens in Iraq, we have not heard that, but if it does I'm certain we will speak out again -- from any side, any group that's requiring conversion.

MS. GAER: Your turn.

MS. : Elise Labott with CNN. I have two questions, if I may. You said that you have to send a human rights monitor or someone into Iraq and haven't yet been given permission. Well, it's my understanding that at least there're some kind of tie between you and the U.S. Congress. If you could explain why the U.S. government has not given you permission when you're part of the U.S. government? And number two, on the issue of Saudi Arabia, you note in the report along with the State Department that there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Yet, the State Department doesn't want to put that kind of thing on this list if countries are a particularly good friend of ours. If I remember correctly, it was because they thought that they would get more out of Saudi Arabia on this front and other fronts without putting them on the list. So, is it the position of the Commission that the U.S. is trading off relationships with Saudi Arabia in exchange for not listing -- religious rights abuse?

MS. GAER: Let me start with the first question on Iraq. As you know, the United States government has a policy of providing country clearance before any official in any part of the government can go to that particular country. Well we have found that applies as well to our independent Commission. And therefore, we request and have requested permission to travel to Iraq immediately. We have not received it. We will continue to press for that because we do think the situation is urgent. We have written the President about the situation and we will continue to speak out.

MS. : Have they given a reason why?

MS. GAER: Complicated security reasons, too many people trying to go, it'll come soon -- the usual in a crisis type situation. You don't want to be squiring around a bunch of visiting people. I'm not sure. Has the Congress been able to go? I don't think you've had any members of Congress who have gone yet either. So we're looking to news media who are embedded there for a lot of information on the situation.

MS. SADAT: I might add just to that. You know, one of the geniuses if you like of the Commission, but also one of the difficulties, is it sits astride a bunch of different, other agencies. And we're completely independent. We don't take orders directly from the Executive. We're not part of the legislative branch. We're independent.

And when I was on mission last year and I was in France and they said, "Who -- what are you? Do we listen to the State Department? Do we listen to you?" We are independent and we're really a human rights watchdog agency. So to the extent that we're kept out of a country or we have difficulty getting our recommendations implemented sometimes it's because they run afoul, directly afoul, of current government policy. And so that can make it a little awkward for us, but that's what we are.

MS. GAER: On the Saudi question you're quite right. The State Department has said, we have said, any honest observer has said there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. And we believe it should be designated as a country of particular concern. Your question about whether the U.S. is trading off influence is a slightly different question and I'm going to give Michael Young the floor on that.

MR. YOUNG: Let me just mention a word on the envoy as well. Iraq, I suppose it's a little more understandable why we have not -- neither the Commission has been able to go nor the designation yet of a human rights envoy. Afghanistan is somewhat more mystifying and the excuse often given there is well everybody is doing human rights over there, which as we learned in a law school setting, when everybody is doing something nobody is doing it. And that has been our concern.

That is one where the Commission has actually offered to fund and provide all the facilities as well. And we remain disappointed that we have not been able to persuade the State Department to allow us to do that. We've been very clear about that disappointment. We think we have some Congressional allies who are equally disappointed in that as well.

With respect to Saudi Arabia if one reads the statute it isn't really a question whether one can get more or less from this designation. This is a statutory designation. By any fair reading the failure to designate Saudi Arabia simply does not comply with the statutory terms.

Designating a country of particular concern does not require that we send the Seventh Fleet. There's a whole range of things that can be done, including a range of positive incentives as well as disincentives. What the designation requires is the government engage.

And our point has been that we have heard for decades now that private engagement will do well. There is no evidence of that and we think it's time, as we have suggested -- and this policy has been across a number of Administrations -- we think it's clearly time for a different approach to this. The one we have simply has had no discernible effect.

MS. GAER: Yes sir.

MR. : I notice there is no mention of any Western Hemispheric country, especially like Cuba. Is the Commission, at all, engaged with respect to -- Cuba or Mexico where there are some issues? And second, I noticed -- this is sort of cursing the dark and I understand limited staff and limited resources and so forth, but in places like Eastern Europe where there has been great progress in the last decade -- places like Romania, Bulgaria -- is there any plan by the Commission to affirm in the Commission's report progress made in some of these. Because these reports are read in these countries, I can assure you, and they do read criticism but they also look for those affirmations that say progress has been made.

MS. GAER: We are not cursing the darkness. We are lighting candles. Read our reports. We've been thorough. You will see. You heard Professor Kazemzadeh speaking about Russia and the enormous difference. The Commission is examining situations and we are making policy recommendations how things can be improved.

If you read our reports you'll see that we often recommend positive measures. We often speak in those tones. But let's face it, accountability means doing the right thing and respecting rights. And that's what we're here to demand and that's what we're here to advise on and that's what our reports do.

On the question of Cuba, like many other countries we have examined the situation but we have not identified it yet as a country for those lists on particular concerns and so forth. Commissioner Shea will also comment on this.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, thanks for your question, Sam. Cuba is a great concern, especially now. We're seeing a crackdown against the dissidents. The ray of hope there is the Varela Project which grew out of a lay-Catholic effort and are being threatened at this moment because they're calling for a referendum under the constitution of Cuba, something totally within the rule of law of Cuba's constitution.

As you know, there are serious restrictions on religious education, on distribution of religious literature, designation of religious leaders and so on and so forth. And we're taking this under consideration, monitoring it very, very closely at this time. And I wouldn't be surprised to see something come out of our Commission soon on that.

You know, Colombia is another situation. It's not quite clear who is doing what. It's a little murkier than Cuba where the government, the Castro government, is clearly

directing these repressive measures against the various religious groups. But in Colombia you have scores of ministers, pastors, priests, church workers killed, some in the pulpit, over the last year or two. And whether the motive there is religious or not is, again, not quite clear and we're monitoring that closely as well. So I think the Western Hemisphere's time is coming.

MS. GAER: Yes sir.

MR. : -- I was wondering, what is the Commission's approach when religious freedom results in the rise of religious parties that ironically have a goal of suppressing religious freedom? I'm thinking about what seems to be happening in Iraq, and of course the situation in some other Islamic -- particularly Islamic countries.

MS. GAER: I think I can say quite clearly what was said earlier. Freedom of religion is guaranteed for everyone. Everyone means everyone. A party that limits that is doing the wrong thing. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says no individual group or organ of society has a right to destroy the rights of others. It's a very simple statement and it's exactly relevant in this situation.

MR. LAND: If I could just amplify on that and say let's be very clear. This Commission's standard is not the constitution of the United States. As much as we would recommend the American model of separation of church and state that's not our model in terms of our standard. Our standard is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments.

So, if a country wants to give preference -- if the citizens of that country decide they want to give preference to a particular religion they have the right to decide to do that. What they don't have the right to do is to say that we will then punish you, discriminate against you, persecute you or kill you if you change from that religion or if you choose to be of another faith and want to express that faith. So freedom of conscious and toleration of others and not government persecution is one thing. We're not saying that a country can't have say a sponsorship -- a government sponsorship -- of a particular religion if they choose to do so, as much as we might personally say that's really not a good idea but that's your business.

MR. : To make my question a little bit more specific, there are probably going to be religious parties running in elections if we do have democracy in Iraq, that do not want total religious freedom post the election. What would your prescription be -- prospectively, how to handle that?

MR. LAND: Well, first of all, you know, it goes to the distinction between a democracy and a republic. We would certainly want the rule of law with a constitution. Constitutions and the rule of law are there to protect minorities from the majority. And so we would say that there needs to be a constitution in place that guarantees the kinds of universal rights that are specified under the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

MS. GAER: Yes, ma'am.

MS. : -- How are your relations with various U.S. government entities? Are they getting what you're doing? Are they supportive? Are there some agencies in particular that you still feel like -- ?

MS. GAER: Our report, again, includes a chapter that critiques the United States government's performance under the International Religious Freedom Act, and that goes across the variety of departments and agencies and branches of the government. I think that you will see that our staff tells me that our report is longer this year than before. I think that's an indication of the fact that we are working more closely on issues of what is the Administration doing?

What is the State Department doing? What is the Congress doing? What are the various actors that we interact with doing? And we are making more recommendations than before. Our capacity to interact with all of them, I believe, has been growing and thank you for the question.

MR. YOUNG: I think it's worth adding that, of course, a lot of this is individual. I mean, it changes certainly every few years and even within each bureau of the State Department or the National Security Council it changes with the personnel and so forth. But I would say there are two or three things worth keeping in mind.

One is a great deal of it starts from the Administration's perspective, from the top and the commitment of the President is critical. And to the extent that is effectively communicated we work much better with all the different parts of the government as they realize we are sharing a common objective and common goal. When that isn't the case relations are more challenging.

Congress has been an enormously powerful supporter of what we've been doing and I think that's worth highlighting. But third, I think it's also important to keep in mind the structure of the law itself. One of the things that is rather under-remarked in the law is the requirement that the State Department also issue an annual report on freedom of religion. One consequence of that has been to put in every embassy and consulate around the world at least one person who's charged with looking at and thinking about that issue. Over time the effect and the impact of that, I think, may well be very significant as it creates a cadre of people within the State Department who necessarily view at least part of our relationship with any country through the prism of the values that Americans cherish and hold dear.

MS. GAER: Yes, ma'am.

MS. : -- I can't -- where is it in the report? Because it seems like we have an underlying theme that the U.S. government isn't doing enough, and I've been hearing that for the last 45 minutes. So where do you critique U.S. government performance here, in this report?

MS. GAER: It's in chapter three.

MS. : (Off mike.)

MS. GAER: I don't have the program in front of me.

MR. YOUNG: We certainly talk about the State Department and its implementation of the IRFA, number one. But number two, actually every country report contains an examination of the U.S. government and what it's doing. I mean, that's exactly what our reports are focused on.

We are not simply repeating all the information contained in the U.S. State Department report. But, rather, we are looking at what can be done in those countries with respect to advancing freedom of religion and what the U.S. government should be doing about it by implication in every case, what it isn't currently doing about precisely that.

MS. GAER: Our Executive Director, Joseph Crapa, has just given me a copy and confirmed it's chapter three, beginning page 45.

MS. SADAT: You know, and I'd just add I don't think all we do is criticize government policy. I mean, the embassies for example, as Commissioner Young was saying, are extraordinarily helpful to us. When we're abroad the State Department is organizing visits and arranging for us to meet with individuals and there's certainly a lot of collaboration going on there.

So I think we don't just curse the darkness, which I know is all kind of a critique of the Commission. But I think our role, since we focus on more a single issue or single set of issues, is to raise the profile of those issues with other agencies and with other branches of the government that have a much broader panoply of interests that they're considering when they formulate policy.

MS. GAER: And if I may extend this metaphor just for another second, when I said we were lighting candles we are lighting candles of the way to dignity, respect, the future, the way to change things within each country, and the policies to follow. You'll see that all both in the individual reports at the end, in the recommendation section you have in the general report, chapter two, which contains the recommendations of countries of particular concern. But then you have chapter four which summarizes all of the Commission's recommendations in all the little extra reports that you have. So, I think you'll find it a handy guide to that material.

Further questions? I'm sorry.

MR. STITH: Yeah, as one who's term is about to expire on the Commission let me just say that I've appreciated the integrity and the breadth and field of vision that my

colleagues have brought to this enterprise. I mean, while certainly one could argue that other countries might be added to the list of those countries that we cited, I think it's inarguable that the countries that we've in fact focused on don't -- that they do in fact need to be on the list. The other point that I would make is that I think that when you look at the present geopolitical environment and our fight against terrorism, that there are some places that it would have been easy, or some folks might argue understandable, for this Commission to take a walk on in terms of punctuating the importance of dealing with religious freedom, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan. And I think that the Commission has been, I hate to use the word courageous because that sounds a little self aggrandizing, but I think it's moved with a great deal of integrity of being where it needs to be and highlighting issues that need to be highlighted.

MS. GAER: Yes, sir.

MR. : (Off mike.)

MS. GAER: This is the Commission's first report on Saudi Arabia and we did cover some developments based on a mission there in the 2001 report. But this is the first stand alone report. It is the Commission's longest report. It goes into considerable detail about what is going on, what has changed since 9/11, what has not changed. It explains where the allegations have been, particularly on issues like exportation and it concludes that what is urgently needed is a congressionally mandated and funded study of how exportation may have -- of any exportation that has led to the promotion of hate or violent acts or the like, in terms of human rights abuses.

We think this issue has wings. We think this issue is vitally important. It's time to speak out. It's time to study. It's time to report back and it's time to apply the same standards to Saudi Arabia that we apply elsewhere. We think this will be attended to and frankly we hope you will report on it.

Thank you.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just wanted to emphasize that I think that the Saudi report is one of the most creative reports we have done and the most creative suggestions in the field, actually, focusing on Saudi Arabia. We tried to set out some achievable goals or benchmarks for the Saudis to take and for the U.S. to press on, goals like: permitting non-Wahabbi places of worship in special compounds or zones for foreigners or in unadorned buildings designated for this purpose. This is -- things that are done in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula in other countries and it's certainly achievable, and there's a number of them.

We also, as Ms. Gaer said, called for a congressional study. That is a starting place for really documenting -- for an official documentation of how the Saudi government may be promoting hatred and fomenting violence against other religious groups. Looking at textbooks, mandating some kind of standards -- or recommending standards for U.S. companies working in Saudi Arabia that practice sort of extremist

interpretations of Islam or where there is gender separation in the workplace or where the customers are.

So I urge you all to take a close look at this. It's an important contribution to this field of how to press for greater religious freedom in Saudi Arabia without destabilizing it, because we don't want to end up with something worse. That would be tremendously irresponsible.

We realize we cannot say there must be complete religious freedom tomorrow in Saudi Arabia. That's not going to happen. It's just fruitless to even suggest that and if it did happen the government may be overthrown and replaced with something worse, immediately. So I think it's sensitive, it's creative and it's pushing the ball forward.

MR. YOUNG: Let me also say that I think from a variety of perspectives the stars are aligning to make the timing right on this, in the sense that the Saudi government itself, I think, as there has been more and more scrutiny on what's happened within the country has begun to be more sensitive to that international expression of concern. On May 6th the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia announced himself that they had approved the establishment of the first non-governmental human rights organization in Saudi Arabia, as well as the government plans to launch its own national human rights body. And in it they said the human rights group would be quote, "completely independent," although not much more has been said about it at this point.

The government said -- the foreign minister said that they were also moving ahead with the creation of their own institution for quote, "implementing government decisions," end-quote, regarding human rights, and quote, "reformulating local laws so they are consistent with the basic system of governance which is primarily based on human rights." I think the Saudi's themselves are beginning to say it. Our report isn't merely a series of, sort of, a penalty if they don't do it. It's an encouragement of a whole step of positive actions as well as positive reinforcement and assistance in doing those things. The Saudi government itself has said it will do those things and its feet should be held to the fire.

MS. GAER: Ladies and gentlemen the report on Saudi Arabia talks about the talk and the Commission is talking about the walk. Take a look at it. You'll see all the differences, all these many statements over the last year and a half. Now we're calling for a variety of concrete actions.

We have come to the end of our scheduled time. We thank you all for joining us. If you have further questions please contact the Commission. Anne Johnson is our Director of Communications and she'd be pleased to hear from you.

Thank you.

[END OF EVENT.]